



**Leaders Note**

Acts 10: 1-16 When God unsettles you!

**Thought**

Simon son of Jonah in Joppa! The port city, from which the original Jonah fled, can't help but cause us to draw some parallels as this tale unfolds. Assyria in the east was the great imperial power of Jonah's day — pagan, vile and violent, a harbinger of death and captivity for Israel. You could hardly draw a more fitting parallel to Rome in the west in Peter's day.

And now, for the first time in Acts, we come face to face with a Roman, though it is something of a reappearance. Peter had watched the Master interact with a surprisingly devout and humble Roman centurion some years before. "I have not found such faith, even in Israel!" Jesus had exclaimed. And so now in Acts 10 we meet not a brute or a savage, but a man seemingly bordering on sainthood. The Roman Cornelius is as humble and devout as the thoroughly Hebrew Saul was arrogant and headstrong. It's a surprising twist for the audience, whether Roman or Jew.

And it's another conversion aided by simultaneous visions. Saul had seen Ananias restoring his sight, while Ananias receives his own heavenly call to arise and find the persecutor. And now it's Cornelius quaking before an angelic visitation in Caesarea, while just down the coast in the rival port of Joppa Peter receives his own divine download. While Cornelius requires no repeated command, Peter tries to send his own message to the junk file twice. As in Jonah's story, the off the map gentile (not to mention the sea, the whale, the plant and the worm) is more attuned to what God is doing than is the hero of the story. At least he didn't board a ship bound for Tarshish.

**Context**

A centurion named Cornelius: The name Cornelius was common in the Roman world from 82 B.C. onwards, when Cornelius Sulla liberated ten thousand slaves, all of whom took their patron's name as they established themselves in Roman society. Probably, therefore, the Cornelius of this story was a descendant of one of these freedmen. He is identified as a centurion of the Italian cohort, i.e., a non-commissioned officer who had worked his way up through the ranks to take command of a group of soldiers within a Roman legion. A cohort numbered anywhere from three hundred to six hundred men in size, being officially always the latter.

**A man devout and who feared God:** It seems that Cornelius was a Gentile who sought to worship a monotheistic God, practice a form of prayer, and lead a moral life, apart from any necessary association with Judaism. It was, then, to such a spiritually minded Gentile, Luke tells us, that God first reached out his hand in the advance of the Christian mission.

**“Rise, Peter, kill and eat”** Psychologically, the details of Peter’s vision may be explained in terms of

(1) Peter's increasing perplexity about Jewish-Gentile relations within various Christian congregations;

(2) His gnawing hunger. God frequently reveals himself by means of our human situations. And Peter took what the voice said as a message from God – a message in the form of an almost inscrutable riddle, but one soon to be clarified by both word and event.

### **Caesarea**

Caesarea is in the centre of the coastal Plain of Sharon in northern Palestine, on the shores of the Mediterranean, some sixty-five miles north west of Jerusalem. It was named in honour of Augustus Caesar (cf. Lk 2:1). Herod the Great made the harbour into a magnificent seaport and the village into his provincial capital. He deepened the harbour, built a breakwater against the southern gales, constructed an imposing city with an amphitheatre and a temple in honour of Rome and Augustus, brought in fresh water through an aqueduct that ran over stately brick arches, and established a garrison of soldiers to protect not only the harbour and city but also the fresh water supply.



This area has had a long and chequered history. It was initially settled during the Hellenistic period (third century B.C.), when the Phoenicians built a small port city that they named Straton's Tower. In 90 B.C., Alexander Jannaeus captured it as part of his policy of developing the shipbuilding industry and enlarging the Hasmonean kingdom (The Hasmoneans were the Jewish rulers at the time). Straton's Tower remained a Jewish city for two generations, until the Roman conquest of 63 B.C.E. when the Romans declared Straton's Tower an autonomous city. The city underwent a great number of changes under Herod, who among other things renamed it Caesarea in honour of the emperor. In 22 B.C. he began construction of a deep sea harbour and built storerooms, markets, wide roads, baths, temples, and luxurious public buildings. Every five years the city hosted major sports competitions, gladiator games, and theatrical productions. Caesarea also flourished during the Byzantine period. At the time, much of the land south of the city was used for agriculture. The area continued to be farmed during the early Arabian period as well, apparently until the Crusader conquest in the eleventh century. Over time, this land was buried under the sands shifting along the shores of the Mediterranean.



## Learning Session

Occasionally God decides to rock our boat, He disturbs our comfort and sometimes confuses us for a time, ask if anyone has ever experienced something like that in their lives. Allow one two folk to share and then read the above passage, share some contextual information and split into smaller groups and discuss the following questions:

- What do you find most striking about Cornelius' vision?
- Why was the Lord's command here so hard for Peter to obey and why do you think God does it 3 times?
- How consistently do you live with a sense that heaven is really watching you — is that a comfort to you or is it unsettling?
- Has the Lord ever led you to do something "outside the box" of your religious understanding/ tradition or comfort zone? What happened?

Gather together for a time of feedback. The main points to highlight are that God is more than willing to push us beyond our comfort zones. This is a good thing as it produces growth in us and also brings an element of excitement and life to our faith. These are elements that we need, because once we retreat into what is comfortable we find that our faith also retreats into a place of disillusionment, a lot of us who find ourselves on the fringe of our faith will also find that we have gotten into the habit of chasing comfort and convenience leading up to that point. Whereas, those of us who allow ourselves to be challenged by moving beyond our comfort zones are less like to find ourselves disillusioned by (or doubting) God.

Move to ministry.

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